

If ... Then

If ... then opens and closes with a description of an ordinary day in Copenhagen. There is very little in these descriptions that stands out, and that, Taina Bucher argues, is exactly the point. Embedded among our mundane everyday events, from buying travel tickets to watching Netflix, are the infinitude of algorithms which increasingly shape, and are shaped by, our lives. Taking this as its starting point, the book deliberately echoes Mark Deuze's (2012) *Media life* and its central premise that we now live in and through media. *If ... then* builds on this by evoking and examining what Bucher (2018, p. 1) calls the 'algorithmic media landscape'.

The broad aim of the book is to explore the politics and power of algorithms as the consequences of this landscape continue to unfold. As such, Bucher offers a conjecture for a critical social science of algorithms (Bucher, 2018, p. 15). The book is clearly successful in this aim. Much of this is achieved across chapters two and three, where Bucher establishes the conceptual and methodological dimensions of her study across a complex series of interlinked points. There are two key points that ground this. Firstly, Bucher tackles one-dimensional understandings of algorithms that circulate within what she describes throughout the book as an 'algorithmic imaginary' and instead posits, in chapter two, the notion of a 'multiplicity' of algorithms, drawing directly on Science and Technology (STS) scholar Annemarie Mol (2002). Secondly, Bucher provides an interesting critique of the limits of the black box as a heuristic device for understanding the location of algorithmic agency, and, instead, points towards the temporal dimensions of this agency. Included among this complex movement of ideas Bucher provides are an expanded history of algorithms, a analytic framework for algorithmic power grounded in a synthesised reading of Michel Foucault, and some novel methodological tactics. For readers looking for the crux of this, they will find it in Bucher's argument that:

[...] algorithmic power and politics is neither about algorithms determining how the social world is fabricated not about *what* algorithms do per se. Rather it is about *how* and *when* different aspects of algorithms become available to specific actors, under what circumstance, and who or what gets to be part of how algorithms are defined. (Bucher, 2018, pp. 3–4, italics in original)

In terms of its broad audience, the book is a well-timed contribution to the widespread attention that is currently being focussed on the digital politics of what Shoshanna Zuboff (2019) has most recently termed 'surveillance capitalism'. Thus, as critical concerns about the political economy of digital data take shape, the book's three empirical case studies of Facebook's New Feed, social media users, and Scandinavian news organisations, based on original qualitative data collected by Bucher, offer useful points of in-depth analysis. It is important to note that in doing so *If ... then* does not attempt to offer an encompassing theorisation of society. This, however, points to the strengths of Bucher's contribution, in that it offers a framework for micro-political inquiry that actively complements the work of those that do seek to provide more holistic perspectives, such as Zuboff.

For scholars working across the fields of media, journalism, communication,

and digital

politics – the book's intended audience as part of the Oxford *Digital politics* series – the book is a useful contribution in several ways. Owing to the ambience of algorithms, this is a book that it can be approached from many different perspectives and applied to numerous empirical contexts. For example, innovations in political campaigning, despite not being a key feature of Bucher's study, can be seen through the lens of chapter five, which explores the algorithmic aspects of everyday social media use.

One of the key strengths of *If ... then* is that it is rich in potentially operationalisable analytic concepts. Thus, for scholars looking to conduct further empirical studies of algorithms, Bucher's work should be a required reading when it comes to theorising findings. For example, ideas such as the 'technicity of algorithms' (Bucher, 2018, p. 153) – a relational understanding of algorithms agentic capacity underpinned by the book's theoretical basis on the co-production of social life, practices, and technologies – offers a useful way to ground the much-needed qualitative research on algorithms in action. Helpfully for the reader, there is a succinct conclusion which helpfully summarises this raft of concepts.

If ... then constitutes a step forward in the relationship between the fields of media, journalism, communication, and digital politics and the field of STS. To date, many studies have engaged with STS-based concepts, such as 'assemblage', in investigations of topics such as election campaigns. Bucher broadens this engagement by exploring a range of STS scholars, including Mol, Karin Knorr-Cetina, John Law and Michel Callon. But Bucher also deepens this engagement, since the STS-disposition that she adopts naturally invites co-research with STS scholars who are also increasingly concerned about the exact same issues that Bucher raises in *If ... then*. Thus, the book can also be interpreted as a manifesto for conducting inter-disciplinary research with STS scholars.

One key criticism of *If ... then* is that, despite the dissective analysis of algorithmic power that it provides, it has comparatively little to say about the consequences that this political condition poses for democracies. While there already exists a substantive debate on media and democracy, that does not necessarily need further contributions, the impression is that the analysis contained within *If ... then* is exactly the kind of contribution that is needed to help move this debate forward. Of course, Bucher does not overlook this dimension, as chapter six rightfully touches on the democratic function of journalism vis-à-vis misinformation. Yet there is a sense that more scope was available in the conclusion, in particular, to have explored and even proposed some of the consequences that 'algorithmic life', as Bucher refers to it there, poses for democracies.

In summary, *If ... then* is a highly relevant study that continues to push the algorithmic imaginary away from problematic 'matters of fact' to a 'matters of concern', to refer to Bucher's very own evocation of Bruno Latour (2004; cited in Bucher, 2018, pp. 17–18). This is an important work. More than this, Bucher's contribution also reflects positively the state of the media and communication research, at a time when interventions from within the field has become ever more required within civic society (Nielsen, 2018).

References

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